

MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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PRESS RELEASE

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THE WORK OF ATGET: THE ANCIEN REGIME
January 23 - March 3, 1985

An exhibition of photographs of the great turn-of-the-century French photographer Eugène Atget opens at The Cleveland Museum of Art January 23 and runs through March 3. Titled The Work of Atget: The Ancien Régime, the exhibition presents 120 photographs of three monuments of France's aristocratic past: the gardens of Versailles, Saint-Cloud, and Sceaux. Once the noble retreats of Bourbon princes, the gardens were public parks in Atget's time, eloquent with what one observer has called "the fading romance of something about to disappear."

Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget (1857-1927) was trained as an actor, had wanted to be a painter, and came to be a photographer at age forty-one through economic necessity. He opened his studio in Paris in 1891, supplying pictures of landscapes, animals, flowers, monuments, and landscape foregrounds to painters. He photographed single objects and landscapes in a simple expository style meant to be useful as documents to the Barbizon and Impressionist painters of the day. At the turn of the century, when preservation societies were formed to agitate against the urban modernization of Paris, he expanded his subject matter to include photographs of the monuments, decorative arts, architecture, and street views of "Old Paris" (pre-revolutionary districts of the city) and supplied these documents to public libraries and archives. His large (7-1/8 x 9-1/2 inches), clear images, made by contact with the glass negatives, are unique primary sources of history.

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The subject of this exhibition is his work in the environs of Paris, where many of the most venerated monuments of l'ancien régime--aristocratic France as yet untroubled by revolution--are located. He revisited some sites every year and in the different seasons, pursuing favorite motifs--the buildings of the great gardens, long graveled walks, decorative urns and statues, portraits of individual trees, and the dark shapes of trees mirrored in calm reflecting pools.

From 1901 until his death in 1927, Atget devoted much of his energies to documenting the châteaux and parks, building a body of work that has been called "a private poem composed of trees, earth, marble, water, and sky." He began taking photographs of Versailles in 1901 and of Saint-Cloud in 1904.

The great 17th century landscape architect Le Nôtre had designed the enormous park at Versailles in keeping with the imperial visions of Louis XIV, the Sun King. Atget ignored those vast spaces with their almost endless progressions of details and, by harmonizing small visual segments, depicted the place on a more human scale.

Similarly at Saint-Cloud, Atget produced neither a map of the park nor a catalogue of its artifacts; he must have felt that nature rather than human artifice was the dominant force at Saint-Cloud, for trees and the radiant effects of light are his primary subject. It was at Saint-Cloud that he first experimented with shooting directly into the light and exploring the halation, or halo effect, which results.

The park at Sceaux was in a tangled and decaying state when Atget photographed it in the spring of 1925. John Szarkowski, organizer of the exhibition and co-author of the catalogue, considers the series Atget made there "the most consistently remarkable and perhaps the best." The Sceaux pictures, which Szarkowski describes as "subtly obscure in description, mysterious in design, spatially ambiguous, and elegiac," seem imbued with the presence of the artist himself.

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Atget's career lasted no more than thirty years. He started photographing when he was forty-one and died when he was seventy. He had no exhibitions of his work, which included around 10,000 photographs, and no standing whatever as an artist in his own time. He never expressed a theory, set down an explanation of his work, or spoke a word in his own behalf. At the end of his life he was a picturesque figure with shabby work clothes, antiquated equipment, and the large black cloth he draped over himself when he took his pictures.

Shortly after his death in 1927, the photographer Berenice Abbott, who knew Atget and had made his portrait, rescued about 5,000 of his negatives and prints from almost certain destruction. She and an art dealer, the late Julien Levy, purchased the works from Atget's landlady; the Museum of Modern Art purchased the Abbott-Levy collection in 1968.

It has been noted that Atget pursued his documentary mission with nineteenth century tools and a nineteenth century vision, that he was a genuine Romanticist who regretted the modern world. He got up before dawn to begin work with the first morning light, usually photographed until noon, then returned home to process and print his day's work. He lugged a bulky wooden view camera, a tripod, and glass negatives in heavy wooden holders--almost 40 pounds worth of equipment. On occasion he was adamantly reactionary, as when the surrealist artist Man Ray (who purchased an occasional Atget photograph) offered to print some of his negatives on a paper newly available. Atget refused, saying that since his photographs were only documents they would sell just as well using his old-fashioned technique and materials.

Atget early in his career devoted himself to documenting Old Paris as clearly as possible. After the First World War, including a two-year period (1917 and 1918) in which he took no pictures at all, his work took on a markedly

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different look, passing, as Maria Morris Hambourg, co-author of the catalogue, notes, from the objective and declarative to the subjective and lyrical. He dispensed with photographic order, clarity, and usefulness in favor of expression and in so doing enlarged documentary standards. Ms. Hambourg observes that in the later years, "He emptied much detail and incident out of his pictures and filled them with resonant atmosphere and silence." The photographs are "rich in mystery and inference." The German critic Walter Benjamin's observation that "a strange surrealist silence seems to dominate Atget's pictures, as if we are present at the scene of a crime recently committed," eloquently describes these later photographs.

The Cleveland Museum of Art owns one Atget photograph, Rue du Regard (Paris, not dated), purchased in 1980 from the Norman Q. Stone and Ella A. Stone Memorial Fund. It is on view in Gallery D for the duration of the exhibition.

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The Work of Atget: The Ancien Régime is third in a four-part series of exhibitions of Atget's work organized by The Museum of Modern Art in New York. It is part of the Springs Industries Series on the Art of Photography at The MOMA and is supported by a generous grant from Springs Industries, Inc. The Cleveland showing is assisted by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

The Work of Atget: The Ancien Régime, a 192-page volume co-authored by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg, is published by The Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with the exhibition and is available in the Museum bookstore in a clothbound edition only for \$40.00. Maria Morris Hambourg will give a lecture on the subject of the exhibition Wednesday, January 23, at 5:45 pm. A 30-minute film on Atget is also scheduled January 23, at 12:30 and 7:00 pm. Barbara Kathman of the Department of Art History and Education will give gallery talks on Wednesday, February 6, and Sunday, February 10, at 1:30 pm.